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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002147

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER NIGERIAN PRES GOWON - NO NEED FOR CONCERN  
ON PRESIDENT'S HEALTH, SUPREME COURT WILL UPHOLD ELECTION

REF: ABUJA 2123

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b  
& d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Ambassador met with former Nigerian President Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975) on October 28 to discuss the Supreme Court case on the 2007 presidential elections and President Yar'Adua's health (Poloff was notetaker). Gowon assured the Ambassador there is "no reason for concern." He believed the Supreme Court will "act in the best interest of Nigeria" and uphold Yar'Adua's election. The anticipated Cabinet reshuffle was delayed not because of Yar'Adua's health, he maintained, but due to competing political interests and Yar'Adua's insistence on "getting it right." Gowon said he was not aware of any health issues other than Yar'Adua's kidney problems. He had not recently seen or met with the President, though he was hopeful he would meet with him in the next several days. Gowon does not appear to have regular access to the President (although he recently spoke with him for the Sala celebrations) or his inner circle of advisors, so he is likely not privy to current information on Yar'Adua's health or the thinking inside the villa on the Supreme Court verdict. Ambassador asked Gowon if he heard something that made him change his above stated opinion, would he let her know; Gowon agreed. Gowon does not belong to any of the political parties, thus he said he presents his personal views. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Ambassador met with former Nigerian President Yakubu Gowon (Nigeria's second military, and longest serving, Head of State, 1966-1975) on October 28 to discuss the pending Supreme Court case regarding the 2007 presidential election and President Yar'Adua's health (Poloff was notetaker). On the Supreme Court decision, Gowon said he believed that the justices will "act in the best interest of Nigeria," and that he is confident they will uphold the election results. He assured the Ambassador that there is "no reason for concern" and was adamant that Yar'Adua would have won even if the elections had been free and fair -- though not by such a large margin. He pointed out that the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) was the only cohesive, organized party with a truly national reach and alluded to Obasanjo's reference in winning the 2007 elections as a "do or die affair" for the PDP, noting that the PDP did "all it could" (read corrupt practices) to win. Gowon indicated that Vice President Goodluck Jonathan had never wanted to be Vice President and was disappointed to have to leave the position of Bayelsa

Governor, hinting that the Governorship was much more lucrative. Gowon indicated that Obasanjo's desire all along, however, was to have a south-south president and that he calculated on Yar'Adua's weak health as a vehicle to achieve this.

13. (C) Gowon said he tried to convince former President and 2007 presidential candidate Mohamadu Buhari to accept the outcome of the 2007 elections. In the absence of such acceptance, Gowon said he counseled Buhari to limit his criticism to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and former President Obasanjo, seeing them as ultimately responsible for the elections. Gowon told the Ambassador that Buhari refused to attend the one Council of State meeting Yar'Adua called since taking office because of his objections to the elections and Obasanjo's participation in the meeting. (NOTE: The Council of State is an official body including the President, Vice President, all living former presidents, former Supreme Court chief justices, standing governors, the Attorney General, the Senate President, and Speaker of the House; the constitution requires that it be consulted on certain kinds of decisions.) Gowon concluded that once the Supreme Court had announced its verdict, Buhari would resume attendance and use the Council as a venue to advise and counsel the Yar'Adua administration.

14. (C) The Ambassador told Gowon there is considerable concern within the USG about the pace of the Yar'Adua government and the appearance that the government is adrift as a result of Yar'Adua's health and uncertainty over the

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electoral case. Gowon assured the Ambassador that things are getting better -- that Yar'Adua will be able to take charge and move forward after the Supreme Court ruling. He maintained that the anticipated Cabinet reshuffle was delayed not because of Yar'Adua's health, but due to competing interests and Yar'Adua's insistence on getting it right. He said Yar'Adua is very focused and consumed right now with budget issues, in particular the benchmark oil price.

15. (C) The Ambassador told Gowon that rumors had surfaced that Yar'Adua might suffer from something more serious than kidney problems, including the possibility of lung cancer. She relayed to Gowon that she spoke to First Lady Turai Yar'Adua on October 27 and expressed concern over the President's health, offering assistance and access to information on medical facilities in the U.S. as might be needed. Gowon said he was not aware of any medical problem aside from the kidney disease that had become public knowledge during the campaign. He said Yar'Adua had undergone a successful kidney transplant (he believed from a family member donor). Gowon told the Ambassador he had tried unsuccessfully to arrange a meeting with Yar'Adua during the early October Sala (end of Ramadan) holiday. He said Yar'Adua called him a few days later and that his speech sounded "weak." Gowon hoped to see Yar'Adua in the next few days. Gowon praised the Ambassador for her handling of the health question with the First Lady, noting that she could gain access through the First Lady even when it is not possible to gain access to the President.

16. (C) COMMENT. Gowon, who is 75, is an aging former military president who, despite remaining active in his speaking and religious activities, does not appear to have regular access either to the President or his inner circle of advisors. That he may be unaware of the President's current health condition is not unlikely -- he relayed to us that former dictator Abacha was buried before he was informed of his death, though this was largely due to his travels. Still, we cannot rule out the possibility that health rumors may be circulating and perpetuating themselves amongst a small group of Abuja elite. That a Supreme Court decision to uphold Yar'Adua's election is clearly "in the best interest of Nigeria" is not a new concept -- Governor Saraki (reftel)

expressed a similar sentiment in his October 27 discussions with the Ambassador. END COMMENT.

17. (U) This cable coordinated with Consulate Lagos.  
Sanders